

The name of a foreigner's God

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The name of a foreigner's God

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Summary

Three times Will Graham visits the Norman Chapel

Notes

My second fill for the Hannibal bingo. The prompt was The Norman Chapel. Hope you enjoy!

"The foyer is the Norman Chapel in Palermo; severe, beautiful, and timeless with a single reminder of mortality: a skull graven on the floor." Those words have been engraved in Will's mind since Hannibal uttered them. He was quite surprised by the small size of the Chapel when he arrived in Palermo.

Europe feels smaller, history weighs heavy in those places, a veil of gravitas hanging over the cities like fine mist. People walk like ghosts among memories of centuries past and Will feels at home, despite Palermo being so different from the open fields around his house or the concrete monstrosities that his country calls cities.

The chapel takes his breath away. Its beauty is overwhelming. From the ceilings to the walls, to the floor, no inch has been left bare of decoration. Marble mosaics golden, red and white shine on the floors and the lower part of the walls. The upper parts are covered in countless biblical scenes made from golden tesserae. Even the ceilings are either intricately carved or painted.

It's flamboyant and breathtaking. He understands immediately why someone as in love with beauty as Hannibal chose this place as the foyer of his mind palace. Will doesn't believe in God, nor does Hannibal, but this is as much a temple of beauty as it is a temple of the Christian God who presides from the apse with his open book and raised hand.

In this, maybe, Hannibal is profoundly European; there's a love of beautiful things that seem absent from America. Even Will himself has never learned to appreciate beauty for beauty's sake. America is utilitarian, there is no transcendence to be found there except in their landscapes whose scale defies human understanding. It's the first time he's experiencing the transcendental elegance of architecture.

Yet for all the beauty of the place, he feels strangely detached from it all. He doesn't feel crushed under the cruel burden of regrets or what-ifs, despite Abigail's memory standing at his side. He wants to understand Hannibal, his psychiatrist, his friend, his betrayer, his enemy, and finally his...something.

Will doesn't have the words to describe what Hannibal meant to him in those days leading to the bloodbath of that night. He shies from defining the allure, the push and pull of their strange intimate dance. With eyes newly opened, Will *saw* Hannibal, and Hannibal let him. They changed each other and then Hannibal fled.

It seemed logical to begin here, steps echoing emptily in the golden silence. There is surprisingly little crowd. It's easy for Will to feel alone. Especially when most of the other visitors have their heads bowed in devotion as rays of light illuminate the mosaics wall over them.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he makes his way over the altar and halts over the praying skeleton, the white bones standing in sharp contrast with the red marble that bathes it like blood. The skeleton head is turned away from the beseeching gesture of his hands, as if he can't bear to look at the one he's praying to.

In a way, Will understands. After all, he still remembers when eye contact with Hannibal was too much for him. How far he's come since then, how much Hannibal changed him, how much he changed himself. He turns away. He doesn't need to stare at a reminder of his mortality when he carries one on his skin.

This visit should have been enough. After all, the Chapel is exactly how Hannibal described it, golden yet solemn, incense permeating the air and clinging to his clothes after he leaves. Another memory that clings to him. Yet it's not enough. His feet carry him to the chapel as they did the day before.

The strange calm that had carried him over ever since he woke up in the hospital shatters. His breath stutters and his heart pounds widely against his breast. There is a new addition to the chapel. A bleeding and broken heart, a twin mirror of the one that tries to escape from his rib cage at this very moment.

Hannibal is here. Will knows it with the certainty that he's lacked all his life. Yet he misses him, although Will's forgiveness echoes between them in the dark catacombs, his words the only living thing to be found in this place.

The second time the doors of the Cappella Palatina open for Will, there is no one else. Gone is the penumbra of last time. Candlelight illuminates the Chapel and its lonely occupant. Hannibal's silhouette commands attention as easily as ever, but he is turned away from him, denying Will the ability to see his face after three long years.

It is his punishment, he thinks. After all, Will was the one to deny him first, chase Hannibal away with cruel words that tore Hannibal as surely as Hannibal's tore him in his kitchen in Baltimore before. Will doesn't regret his words, not really. Will had said the truth back then. He had been tired. Bone deep tired in a way that made him want to wade into the stream and never surface again, cradled weightlessly in the water's embrace.

He's had three years to build himself back, three years during which he was able to build his foundations up again after Hannibal destroyed them until all that remained of Will Graham was quicksand that kept running through his fingers. Paradoxically, he'd never known himself as well as when he'd been with Hannibal. But that clarity had cut like glass. It had hurt, and Will still bore the marks on his skin.

Molly had come in, down to earth and grounded. She'd kept him from slipping away into the stream, steadying him when he had been malleable before, shapeless water. He loves her, a quiet kind of love, warm like a spring day.

Walking back into the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, of his own volition no less, feels strange. His feet carry him without his conscious knowledge, knowing the way to him. He's floating through a dream, memories superimposing over reality. His own stay in these walls, Abigail, the knife tearing through his flesh, the saw to his head. There's no pendulum this time, and yet the walls dissolve around him. Dark corridors of harsh concrete and steel bars become pale Sicilian stone.

The doors open for him soundlessly, and there he is. Standing in the sanctuary, apart from men, stance as strong and proud as ever, challenging God to send him away. He doesn't turn, but Will knows that Hannibal is aware of his presence. How could he not be? The air tastes different simply from breathing the same oxygen for the first time in three years, and Hannibal's sense of smell must be as keen as ever. Yet he does not turn.

Will's feet carry him until he's standing in the heart of Hannibal's mind palace, on top of the skull where Hannibal left him his heart three years ago. How fitting. The distance stretches between them across time and space and Will gives it shape with three simple words.

"Hello, Doctor Lecter." Hannibal isn't the only one who has learned how to cut. Slowly, ever so slowly, Hannibal turns towards him and smiles.

"Hello, Will."

Three years of not hearing his voice, three years of not seeing him. He has changed. Three years is a long time and captivity doesn't suit him. Hair cropped short turned steel grey, a white jumpsuit ill-fitting in a way that reminds Will of Hannibal's camouflage attire during their first meeting. Yet the eyes are the same. Languid, amused. The same sardonic smile pulls at Hannibal's lips.

Three years is a long time to forget. Will hasn't. He stares at Hannibal, curiously detached, unable to focus on anything other than the man on the other side of the glass wall as the splendour of the Chapel fades away and reality reasserts itself once again. Gold and marble are replaced by wood panelling and stainless steel. Half light hides Will. Crude light bares the entirety of Hannibal's cell and self.

Distance continues to stretch and Will becomes aware that Hannibal is talking.

"Are we no longer on a first name basis?" the man asks, and Will would laugh if he could.

"I'm more...comfortable the less personal we are."

It's a joke. They both know it and Hannibal is quick to call him out on it.

"You just came here to see me again." Hannibal is right as always. Knowing exactly where Hannibal is doesn't mean he hasn't missed him, petty jabs included. Maybe that's why he can't look away from the scar on his cheek and the maroon eyes. He can't avert his eyes, he has left his glasses behind, they are past that.

He has no idea what his eyes are saying, holding another conversation altogether.

I missed you. I ached for you. I do not regret my words but I missed you .

The Tooth Fairy is only an excuse. If not him, it would have been another. They know this game by heart now, the profiler and the consultant. They can play it anywhere for anyone and they do. Hannibal's tongue is as sharp as ever but the barbs aren't the words that make his scar ache in phantom pain. It's Hannibal's soft parting words that Will is family.

The doors of the chapel close behind Will as he leaves, eyes dry but burning like he's stared at the sun for too long.

He's back in Palerme among the sun-warmed stones. His body aches, all bruised and tender. They've fallen among the thrashing waves of the Atlantic ocean only to be reborn among the midnight blues and teals of the Mediterranean sea. It's early still, the streets more or less deserted. Life is slower here right until the evening when people will crowd the streets and restaurants.

He has an appointment to keep. One made years ago and not honoured. Strange how Palermo feels so familiar when he's only been there once. There's no sense of urgency now, no desperate drive that made him cross the Atlantic once. The weather is balmy and the sea breeze is just on the side of chilly. Which is rather fortunate since he would rather not sweat too much and stain his suit. Not after all the trouble he went through.

It's not even nine yet, the Norman Palace is free of tourists and the Palatine Chapel opens its doors for him again, bathed in the white morning light. It's peaceful, the gentle quiet of early morning mixed with the usual hushed reverence that holy places inspire. Be it the religious or the aesthetic kind.

He makes his way to the front rows of uncomfortable wooden folding chairs. The white marble floor, at least the parts not covered in mosaics, is almost blinding, but Will only has eyes for the man sitting with his back turned to him.

He's clothed in his preferred pattern of plaid, although the suit is far less conspicuous than others. A smile tugs at Will's lips and his cheek twinges angrily. The sutures have been taken out but the wound isn't yet healed. It will take time, but for once in his life, he has time. The future stretches languid before his eyes as he takes a seat on the opposite side of the man, on the other side of the alley dividing the rows of chairs.

He crosses his leg, left over right, a mirror image of Hannibal whose gaze Will can feel, soft yet hungry on him. They do not speak. They don't need to and anticipation hangs heavy in the air.

The sound of feet on the marble floor. A black-clad priest hurries towards them. Will smiles.

"Hello, Monsignor. We have a favour we would like to ask you." Neither he nor Hannibal believe in God, and the Church, if not God, doesn't recognise the wedding of two men. But there is something to be said about exchanging vows in front of the reminder of their mortality, in the foyer of Hannibal's, their, mind palace.

"Would you stand witness as we say our vows?" Will doesn't ask the priest to bless their union. After all, the Atlantic had already done so when it spat them back on land, alive.

Will rises in unison with Hannibal, wounds flaring to life under the beautiful blue-green suit he's chosen. Hannibal's face is pale with strain. The bullet wound has been bandaged and healed as much as it could, but Will knows it still pains Hannibal greatly. They move forward until they are standing once again on the skull.

Will's hand is bare, bereft of the simple golden band that had adorned his finger for the last three years. Hannibal raises it to his lips, eyes starved and tender, never leaving Will's own. The maroon gaze looks like it wants to swallow him whole.

An engraved gold band is slid onto his finger. It's a beautiful ring, heavy with history, larger than his last one, and Will can't help but smile. The ring is warm and it suffuses his whole body, the aches fading.

Feet planted on the ground, lightheaded from both Hannibal's eyes on him and the weight of the gold band on his finger, he takes out another ring from his suit, a twin of the one that now adorns his finger. Hannibal's hands are long-fingered and delicate, capable of drawing out violence and beauty in the same stroke.

Will can feel Hannibal's pulse fluttering as he slides the ring home on Hannibal's fingers without a problem.

"Don't you have any vows to say gentlemen?" asks the priest, tone slightly bewildered. Not that Will blames him really. But they don't have the time nor energy for a full ceremony, no matter what Hannibal would have preferred.

"Do not worry Father, our vows have been engraved on the rings. Love led us to one death." Will answers, though it still hurts to speak with his still healing cheek. It's Dante of course, from the fifth canto of the *Inferno*. Will truly can't think of a more fitting quote.

He hasn't let go of Hannibal's hands and when he lifts his eyes, Hannibal's are fixed on the golden bands on their fingers. Will tightens his grip on Hannibal, overwhelmed with the knowledge that they truly belong with each other now, they are together, finally.

Hannibal comes to him, yielding easily to Will's wishes. And then he's the one sneaking a hand to settle on Will's waist while the other comes to cradle his jaw, tangling in his curls. Like an unfinished sketch with blurred outlines suddenly coming to completion under the artist's hands, Will feels defined for the first time in his life, intimately aware of where he begins and where Hannibal begins.

But then Hannibal's lips are on his and he's lost, returning the kiss with a fervour only tamed by the intimate knowledge of Hannibal's injuries. *I love you*, Will thinks. *I love you*, Will says without words but with his lips and the kiss that grows soft and tender.

When they finally part, Will is panting and Hannibal's pale face is flush, eyes glittering. It takes all of Will's stubbornness to not kiss him again. He becomes gradually aware of reality outside of Hannibal once again, of the priest standing beside them, of the light that blazes through the windows, bathing the chapel in a golden glow.

"Thank you, Father," Hannibal says softly, though he doesn't turn to look at the priest. His attention is still on Will and Will alone. The younger man would blush if he wasn't busy doing the same.

"I think it's time to go. It's unfortunate that we can't linger but I fear Uncle Jack will have already sniffed our scent."

Will bares his teeth in a feral smile.

"He will drive himself mad." Hannibal nods.

"Like Tantalus, forever chasing after something he can never have."

"So be it," Will whispers.

Hand in hand, they finally turn their back to God and his priest, walking back toward the entrance of the Chapel. Later, when it's Jack Crawford's turn to sit in one of the folding chairs, Will and Hannibal are long gone.

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